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ABSTRACT

A new feature in "Country Teacher," "Agrarian Visions" reminds rural teachers that they can do something about rural decline. Like to populism of the 1890s, the "new populism" advocates rural living. Current attempts to address rural decline are contrary to agrarianism because: (1) telecommunications experts seek to solve problems of rural education through interactive television; (2) proponents of rural economic development suggest that rural communities exploit themselves as cheap labor to draw processing or manufacturing plants to their communities to create jobs; (3) some economic development specialists advise schools to become entrepreneurs and create community-saving businesses, when schools do not have the capital to do so; and (4) "human capital theorists" encourage rural schools to create a workforce with the right numeracy, literacy, and social skills to make them attractive to entrepreneurial capitalists. American agrarianism is based on the belief that the individuals who chose the farming life deserve freedom and equality, and that the health of the nation lies in its attempts to keep as many such individuals on the land as possible. Rural teachers should encourage students to engage in dialogue about the forces creating rural decline, allowing them to decide what secures or endangers their freedom as rural people. Future articles will explore the philosophical and historical underpinnings of agrarianism in America. (KS)

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by
Paul Theobald

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Agrarian Visions

by Paul Theobald

Ideas, more than human beings, live with the burden of history. For some time I have toyed with the idea of a "Populist Forum" in each issue of CT. This essay marks the first expression of that desire. But it is not a "Populist Forum" because, in my mind, the history surrounding the idea contains too much intolerance, hatred, and prejudice. While the 1890s movement was truly a grassroots effort to bring democracy to everyday life, it did not last. One reason for this, of course, was because the strength of the movement was co-opted by Democratic party when they adopted the free silver plank of the People's party in 1896. But another reason was the fact that populist leadership, and here the career of Tom Watson is probably the best example, became increasingly partisan in its espousal of racial and religious hatred.

Today there is a "new populism" in America. But this movement is so illdefined as to include among its proponents Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa and former President Ronald Reagan. The idea of populism carries its historical baggage, the good comes with the bad. And so this is not a "Populist Forum." Yet it is written with one otherwise unmistakably populist goal in mind: that there should be more people in the countryside. There should be more farmers, many more; and more shops, businesses, and local craftspersons. This vision, while clearly populist, has also been the mainstay of American agrarianism, a philosophy or worldview that predates the American populist movement. For this reason, I

call this feature "Agrarian Visions."

Those who read Country Teacher share a concern for the countryside. Most of us find some truth in the idea that there is something imminently worthwhile about rural living. We are also painfully aware that most of the country does not live where we do, and that the latest census shows that now there are even fewer of us. It is only infrequently that we engage the ramifications of these circumstances. And when we do, for the most part, we remain silent. It is almost as if there is a certain dignity in stoically bearing what is commonly perceived to be the inevitability of modern societal change.

Still, there are people "doing something" about rural decline. But while I do not mean to devalue their ideas or their intentions, I have little use for their work. For instance, there are now many telecommunications experts interested in rural education. They seek to solve the problem of declining enrollments by cutting the expense of providing teachers for "too few students" (as if such a possibility could exist) by reducing the teaching process to that which can be carried through "interactive" television. These people seem convinced that technology, although it has all but destroyed portions of rural America, can now be employed to save it. Yet I believe co-opting the tools of those who have been destroying us will lead only to more destruction. Rural decline is a human problem and is therefore amenable only to human solutions; those based on democracy not computer chips, on justice not supply and demand, and cooperation not unrestrained competition. As

Wendell Berry once pointed out, "rats and roaches live by competition under the law of supply and demand; it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy."

There is a second group doing something for rural America. Recognizing, perhaps, limitations within the "band-aid" approach inherent in distance learning, this group calls for rural "economic development." The logic here is that local communities should sell themselves as good places for capitalists to establish small processing or manufacturing plants, thus creating jobs. By definition, of course, rural communities are located some distance from major transportation arteries. In convincing businessmen to ignore this and other deficiencies inherent in rural locations, communities are forced to sell themselves by advertising cheap labor. And if, heaven forbid, one or two rural communities begin to compete for a business interest, they are forced to sacrifice their dignity and worth as human beings in the suggestion that they will be used for less than the people in the next community.

Some economic development specialists promote the idea that the local school can, in effect, become the entrepreneur and create community-saving businesses. Schools, however, will always lack the start-up capital necessary to compete head-to-head with the powerful in American society. While seed money may come from corporate foundation sources, I would call it a good bet that far more philanthropic dollars support research that causes rural decline. In one hand a rose, in the other a dagger.

Last, there are "human capital theorists" who seek to use

rural schools to create a workforce with the right numeracy, literacy, and social skills to make them attractive to entrepreneurial capitalists. This line of thought, in my mind, scarcely deserves mention. The idea of converting human beings into capital to be manipulated and used by industrial interests is appalling and, at the same time, a sad commentary on how far this nation has moved from the original Classical Liberal principles upon which it was built.

American agrarianism, a philosophy prevalent at our nation's founding, has had many prophets; Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and most recently, Wendell Berry come to mind. "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God," wrote Jefferson, "whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue." Others, like Daniel Webster, argued that farmers were the "founders of civilization" about the business of "subduing the wilderness." The list of glowing pastoral literature in America is long. Indeed, there has been enough of this rhetoric to create a lasting myth in America, the myth of the sanctity of the family farm.

But farms, of course, have no human rights. They are not concerned with individual freedom, dignity, and equality. Farms are property. And in America property accumulates in the hands of those who can pay for it and protect it. Conventional wisdom, at least, sees nothing wrong with this. As long as there are men out there growing crops and milking cows, as long as they go home at night to a wife and children, America will have preserved its

family farms. For there is another myth that has grown alongside the sanctity of the family farm, and that is the image of farmers as uncommon characters who struggle defiantly, before submitting quietly, to economic forces beyond their control. The dynamic is similar to rural teachers who work year after year with fewer and fewer students, never complaining too loudly, always facing the "inevitable" stoically. Yet before the pre-emption of popular thought regarding America's farms, before Americans began to protect the concept of farms rather than farmers, agrarianism stood for the belief that the individuals who chose the farming life deserved the freedom and equality America purported to offer, and that the health of the nation somehow lay in its attempts to keep as many such individuals on the land as possible.

Because I believe these things I have chosen to work for them. In the tradition of John Dewey, George Counts, and Paulo Freire, I see the rural school as the only logical place to begin to build a new social order. Not, of course, by creating businesses or school-business partnerships, not by imparting "skills for the 1990s;" but by promoting a dialogical rural curriculum that confronts the forces that touch the lives of rural people.

At its best, this is what Country Teacher is all about. It is a journal of ideas and resources for rural teachers. To my mind, there could be no better forum for articulating "Agrarian Visions." When we are told that the idea of a vibrant rural America is an anachronism or a utopian dream, we rarely engage these claims. Yet if America chose to operate with more farmers, small town shops,

and craftspersons, there are endless policy options to facilitate these changes. The problem, of course, is that those who are benefitting from current circumstances would suffer if conditions were so altered. And those who benefit from current rural policy control the print and broadcast media that shapes public opinion.

It is no wonder, then, that agrarian visions are ridiculed and labeled hopelessly pie-in-the-sky. Yet when the status quo is cloaked in the rhetoric of inevitability, as it always is, it takes only casual questioning to reveal the inaccurate nature of its claims. Simply put, rural decline is a function of the priorities of those with power, not an accumulation of inevitable circumstances.

It is my intention that this CT feature, "Agrarian Visions," will serve as a reminder to rural teachers that they can do something about rural decline. To the extent that we still have a voice in classroom curricular decisions, (and there are forces trying desperately to take even this away from us) we can work to change circumstances in rural America.

From first through twelfth grade, we can encourage rural students to dialogically engage the rhetoric of inevitability surrounding the forces that create rural decline. Or, as Thomas Jefferson put it, we can encourage rural students "to decide for themselves what secures or endangers their freedom." In future issues I intend to explore the philosophical and historical underpinnings of agrarianism in America. In the event that there are readers who share an agrarian vision, I would be delighted to

hear from you and weave your thoughts into this feature. I can be reached at the address below:

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